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## **Culturally Relevant Texts and Reading Assessment for English Language Learners**

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### **Abstract**

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This article reports on a study that explored the relationship between reading proficiency and cultural relevance of text for third-grade English Language Learners (ELLs). The author presents the Cultural Relevance Rubric that helps define and determine cultural relevance of texts. Participants used the rubric to rate the cultural relevance of two stories from a standardized assessment. While the two stories were identified as being the same reading level, the participants differed in their reading of each story. Reading accuracy scores for both stories suggest that the participants were within their instructional or independent reading levels. However, miscue analysis and retelling data suggest that readers' comprehension was greater when reading the story they identified as being more culturally relevant. Implications for text selection, especially of texts used for assessment purposes with ELLs, are discussed.

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While working as a bilingual elementary school teacher I often assessed my students' reading proficiency by having them read stories out loud to me. When using stories from an assessment kit, I found that there were certain ones that all of my students struggled to read. For example, it was difficult for my students, who had recently arrived from the flat deserts of northern Mexico, to read a story in the assessment kit about children climbing mountains and finding caves with waterfalls.

Later, as a reading specialist in Hong Kong I found that throughout the elementary school, many of the students struggled to read certain stories used for assessment. When students had difficulty connecting with the text, they also seemed to be less proficient with their reading. The second graders, for example, tended to have difficulty with a story about early pioneers in the United States. Nate (all names are pseudonyms), one of the second grade teachers, shared his concerns about this with me:

All of my students seem to get stuck on level 29! Their reading accuracy rates are fine until we get to the story about pioneers fording a river in the 1800s. When I ask the kids to read that story for our assessment, they make tons of miscues, and I can't go on to the next level. It just doesn't seem fair. We don't study westward migration with the kids here in Hong Kong so they really struggle with the story.

Nate's concern is certainly not unique. In my work now as a professor of reading, graduate students come to me with similar concerns about finding accurate ways to assess the reading of their English Language Learners (ELLs). Their students often struggle with reading not only because they are not proficient in English, but also because they lack the background knowledge to understand what they are asked to read.

### **The Problem: Text Selection**

Often, texts that are used to assess the reading proficiency of ELLs are not culturally relevant for the students who read them (Goodman, 1982). Culturally relevant texts are those that readers can connect to (Freeman, Freeman, & Freeman, 2003) and can draw on their background knowledge and experiences to make meaning (Goodman, 1996; Perez, 2004; Smith, 2006). By reflecting on my experiences with reading assessments and the experiences of teachers with whom I have worked, I find that students tend to do poorly on reading assessments when they cannot relate to or bring background knowledge to the text they are asked to read. I have come to realize that perhaps it is not that these students are struggling readers but rather the texts used for assessment need further analyses.

Research has shown that our background and understanding of the world affects our reading (Goodman, 1996; Perez, 2004; Smith, 2006). While research has explored cultural relevance and its relation to reading (Goodman, 1982; Herrero, 2006; Jimenez, 1997; Keis, 2006), few studies have specifically defined cultural relevance to help educators understand how to identify these texts. This article presents a rubric I developed to help specify the components of cultural relevance and is designed to help teachers and students determine the cultural relevance of a text.

I begin with a look at background knowledge and its importance in the reading process. I then explain how the Cultural Relevance Rubric was developed for text selection and present a study in which I used the rubric to explore the relationship between cultural relevance and reading proficiency for third grade ELLs. The article concludes with a discussion of how educators might take cultural relevance of text into account when working with students, and especially when assessing reading proficiency.

## **Starting with Students' Backgrounds**

Smith (2006), who has studied reading from a psycholinguistic perspective, explains that reading starts with the background the readers bring to text. Readers come from diverse backgrounds with different ideas about the world so previous experiences and knowledge, also known as schema, affect how a reader comprehends text (Weaver, 2002). As Kucer and Silva (2006) explain, "Schemata are complex structures of information that represent the individual's past encounters with the world" (p. 32). These interconnected clusters of knowledge play an important role in reading. In order to comprehend texts, readers weave new information into pre-existing schema (García, 2009). Schema theory, when applied to reading, suggests that readers draw on culturally acquired knowledge to guide their comprehension of text (Gibbons, 2009). Clarke and Silberstein (1977) help explain the essence of schema theory:

Research has shown that reading is only incidentally visual. More information is contributed by the reader than by the print on the page. That is, readers understand what they read because they are able to take the stimulus beyond its graphic representation and assign it membership to an appropriate group of concepts already stored in their memories. (p. 136-137)

Research also suggests that it is helpful when readers can make connections between text and their pre-existing schema because "the sense you make of a text depends on the sense you bring to it" (Goodman, 1996, p. 2). Perez (2004), in reporting on a study by Salinger (1993), concludes that "the background knowledge and experiences that students bring to literacy tasks are perhaps the most important elements that influence children's ability to read with high levels of comprehension and write coherent and cohesive texts" (p. 321). This research suggests that when readers can connect what they read to their own lives and backgrounds, they will have better comprehension.

Additional research with English Language Learners supports the importance of engaging ELLs with texts that connect with their lives. In reporting on their extensive work with ELLs, Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) highlight the important role readers' schemas plays in text comprehension. They explain that, "According to schema theory, reading comprehension is an interactive process between the text and reader's prior background knowledge" (p. 553). Consequently, students with better developed schemas for a text can comprehend that text more fully.

## ELLs Build on Background with Culturally Relevant Texts

Culturally relevant texts draw on the schema that ELLs bring to reading. Keis (2006) writes about *Libros y Familias (Books and Families)*, a family literacy program that uses culturally relevant books for Spanish-speaking families. In his study of the program, Keis (2006) found that the use of these books validated the culture and life experiences of the participant readers. Validating and celebrating students' backgrounds and cultural experiences can often lead to reading engagement and increased reading proficiency. Herrero (2006) conducted a study of students from the Dominican Republic that focused on how teachers could organize literacy instruction using cultural literature to raise the skill levels of low-achieving, language-minority students. The teachers involved in the study found that for the students, the "use of cultural literature and practices fostered pride, participation, commitment and success" (p. 222).

These studies show that the use of culturally relevant texts can also encourage greater reader engagement which is particularly important because of the relationship between reading engagement and reading achievement. According to Guthrie, Schafer, and Huang (2001), engagement is a stronger predictor of reading achievement than any other factor, including socio-economic status. A study by Feger (2006) found that reading engagement for ELLs increased with the use of culturally relevant books. Likewise, a teacher who participated in a study on ELLs conducted by Stuart and Volk (2002) reported, "The more I had incorporated culturally relevant literature... into the curriculum, the more my students' engagement in reading had increased" (p. 18).

Goodman (1982) summarized extensive reading assessment research she and her colleagues conducted with different populations of students, including ELLs. Their research showed that readers had higher levels of comprehension when texts were culturally relevant. "The more familiar the language of the text, the actions of the characters, the description of the setting, the sequence of the events - the closer the readers' predictions will match the author's expression and the easier that text will be for the reader to comprehend" (Goodman, 1982, p. 302). In his study of struggling Latino and Latina readers, Jimenez (1997) reported similar findings as he concluded that students' literacy needs were best met when teachers used culturally familiar texts. Students were able to make inferences and ask questions because of the links they made to their own backgrounds. Through these types of strategic activities, the students were able to strengthen their metacognitive awareness during reading, which led to increased reading comprehension (Jimenez, 1997).

## **What Makes a Text Culturally Relevant?**

While research supports the importance of providing students with culturally relevant text, the question many teachers face is: What makes a text culturally relevant? As Freeman, Freeman, & Freeman (2003) point out, “Not all books about Spanish speakers, for example, are relevant to all Hispanic students. Some books merely perpetuate stereotypes. Others, especially those published in Spain, contain settings and events that are unfamiliar to most Latino students in the United States” (p. 7).

Goodman (1982) also addressed the complex issue of cultural relevance. Through her research, Goodman found that there were factors to consider beyond the ethnicity of the characters in a story. Consequently, she developed a list of topics for educators to consider in the selection of culturally relevant texts that include:

Socio-cultural-economic institutions including such relations as:  
occupations, housing patterns, family relationships, schooling, religious, etc.

Setting

Chronological time

Age and sex of characters

Language variations represented in the text

Theme, moral, world view

Readers' experience with certain kinds of texts. (p. 303)

Building on Goodman's (1982) work, I developed a rubric that can be used as a text selection tool to help identify culturally relevant texts. Through my work with teachers and bilingual students, the rubric was refined to include a set of questions around the factors Goodman (1982) identified (see Figure 1). Teachers and students can consider eight factors as they choose texts using this rubric: 1) the ethnicity of the characters, 2) the setting, 3) the year the story takes place, 4) age of the characters, 5) gender of the characters, 6) the language or dialect used in the story, 7) the genre and exposure to this type of text, 8) the reader's background experiences. Using a four point Likert scale, teachers or readers can rate each question on the rubric with possible responses ranging from a “1” indicating no connection to a “4” showing a very close connection to the particular aspect of culture.

Cultural Relevance Rubric			
<b>Are the characters in the story like you and your family?</b>			
Just like us .....Not at all like us			
4	3	2	1
<b>Have you ever lived in or visited places like those in the story?</b>			
Yes.....No			
4	3	2	1
<b>Could this story take place this year?</b>			
Yes.....No			
4	3	2	1
<b>How close do you think the main characters are to you in age?</b>			
Very close.....Not close at all			
4	3	2	1
<b>Does the story have main characters who are boys (for boy readers)?</b>			
Girls (for girl readers)?			
Yes.....No			
4	3	2	1
<b>Do the characters talk like you and your family?</b>			
Yes.....No			
4	3	2	1
<b>How often do you read stories like this one?</b>			
Often .....Never			
4	3	2	1
<b>Have you ever had an experience like one described in this story?</b>			
Yes ..... No			
4	3	2	1

Figure 1. Cultural Relevance Rubric

### The Study

Based on my informal observations of how students read culturally relevant texts with greater proficiency than texts that did not relate to their background, and having developed a rubric that could be used to determine how culturally relevant a text is, I conducted research on the effects of using culturally relevant text with a group of ELL readers. The nine third-grade ELLs who participated in this study came from an urban elementary school located in a large Northeastern city in the United States that had a total of 45 third grade ELL students. All of the ELL

students were invited to participate in the study, and nine children and their parents responded. The nine participants included ELLs who came from the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America. Each participant was asked to read and retell two third grade stories from a commercial assessment kit which identified them as being at the same reading assessment level. While the stories have approximately the same number of words, despite their similarities, they appear to differ in their degree of cultural relevance.

A limitation of this study is that data from the reading of only two stories were collected and compared but, because of the large volume of data generated in the oral reading miscue analysis, this kind of research methodology does not typically necessitate nor involve large numbers of readers or multiple texts (Brown, Goodman, & Marek, 1996). The 18 readings, retellings, and cultural relevance responses produced by the nine participants provide sufficient qualitative and quantitative data to inform this baseline study. Future studies exploring cultural relevance with multiple assessment texts would provide an even greater number of results to compare, which could further inform this line of research.

The first story used in this study, *Kwan the Artist* (Giles, 2007a), is about a young boy who is new to the United States. Kwan has a hard time understanding his teacher and wishes he could do something well in his new school. During art, Kwan paints the plane that brought him to this country, and the children and teacher recognize his artistic abilities. The second story is the retelling of Aesop's fable *The Wind and the Sun* (Giles, 2007b). In this traditional story, the wind and the sun argue about who is stronger. When the two see a man walking along a path wearing a cloak they decide to determine strength by seeing who can get the man's cloak off. The wind tries unsuccessfully to show strength by blowing off his cloak. The sun then shows superior strength by shining brightly and warming the man so much that he removes his cloak.

After they read and retold each story, the participants rated the story using the Cultural Relevance Rubric (see Figure 1). Rather than simply handing the students the rubric to read and complete on their own, I read through the rubric items with each student, and we discussed where they felt they connected with each item along the continuum of possible responses. As the children explained why they marked particular scores, I took additional notes about the connections they were making to the texts.

### Analyzing Reading Proficiency

The participants read and retold each story orally, and a digital recording was made of each. The audio recordings were analyzed using the In-depth Miscue Analysis Procedure (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 2005), which is described in more



detail below. In addition to providing an accuracy rate for the reading, this analysis provides a comprehensive, qualitative look at the types of miscues the readers made. Researchers and teachers may analyze miscues to gain insights into how well readers are using the different language cueing systems: semantics (meaning cues), syntax (grammar cues), and graphophonics (visual and auditory cues), along with the reader's background knowledge to construct meaning from texts. Retells are also analyzed to help understand the overall meaning readers have constructed from the text. This method of analysis has proven to be effective as for the past 40 years, miscue analysis has been conducted with monolingual and bilingual children and adults in a variety of languages (Brown, Goodman, & Marek, 1996).

Miscue analysis was developed by Kenneth Goodman (1967) as a way to measure how readers comprehend text as they read. This procedure involves having students read and retell a complete text. Researchers then analyze the reader's miscues, or places where the reader's observed response (what the reader says) does not match what the person listening to the reading expects to hear (what the text says). This analysis of miscues helps show how the reader comprehends the text during reading. When readers omit, insert, substitute, or otherwise change text elements their strengths and weakness in their use of the three cueing systems is revealed. As Goodman (1967) explains, a reader's "expected responses mask the process of their attainment, but his unexpected responses have been achieved through the same process, albeit less successfully applied. The ways that they deviate from the expected reveal this process" (p. 127). In other words, when readers produce what a listener expects to hear as they read, it is not possible to say how or why they did it. However, when readers produce unexpected responses, listeners get important insights into what they are doing as they read. For example, in his reading of *The Wind and the Sun*, Adam substituted *clock* for *cloak* in the following sentence:

*clock*

He was wearing a warm cloak.

This miscue provides a number of insights into Adam's reading process. For one, Adam used graphophonics, which includes visual and auditory cues. *Clock* looks and sounds like the expected response, *cloak*. He also used syntactic information as he substituted a noun for a noun. However, he did not use semantic information; this miscue does not make sense. It is odd to refer to a clock as warm and people do not wear clocks. While the sentence alone is syntactically acceptable (it sounds like a sentence that could be produced in English), it does not make sense, and he did not correct the miscue which ultimately changes the meaning of the story. It could be that Adam was not familiar with the term *cloak*. In fact, three of the nine readers made this very same miscue.

Of course, each participant's reading cannot be evaluated on the analysis of miscues from just one sentence. It is the pattern of miscues across a whole story that provides insights into the reader's comprehension process during reading. Therefore, the nine participants read two complete texts. I then analyzed the miscues they produced to find general patterns of comprehending for each story and evaluated the readers' retellings of each story to determine their overall comprehension. Participants were invited to retell the stories in either English or Spanish. Each retelling included an unaided portion at the beginning during which the readers were asked to retell everything they remembered about the text they read. Next, an aided retelling using open-ended questions prompted students to elaborate on their unaided retelling. Each retelling was transcribed and scored holistically on a scale of 1 to 5 where a score of 5 indicated the most complete retelling (Goodman et al., 2005). To help establish reliability, two scorers rated each retelling.

### Analyzing Cultural Relevance

The reading assessment data were then examined in relation to student's scores on the Cultural Relevance Rubric for each story. On each rubric, the scores for all eight items were added together to provide an overall cultural relevance score. The higher the score, the more culturally relevant the story was for that particular reader. As shown in Table 1, an analysis of the cultural relevance rubric scores shows that all nine participants identified the story *Kwan the Artist* as being more culturally relevant than *The Wind and the Sun*.

**Table 1.** *Cultural Relevance Scores*

Participants	<i>The Wind and the Sun</i>	<i>Kwan the Artist</i>
Ricardo	14	25
Christian	14	20
Lucas	16	26
Anna	10	27
Adam	16	31
Daniela	13	30
Zoraida	10	29
Sandra	19	28
Andres	16	26
<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>14.2</b>	<b>26.9</b>

As students filled in the cultural relevance rubric for *Kwan the Artist*, many commented on connections they made to the text. As we talked through the rubric question “Have you ever had an experience like one described in this story?” Sandra shared that she was also new at her school. “I’m not as new as Kwan, but I only came to this school in first grade.” When reflecting on the question, “Do the characters talk like you and your family?” Lucas shared, “When I lived in New York, I only knew Spanish and my cousin taught me English.” Christian’s comment on the same question was similar, “In kindergarten I only spoke Spanish.” These students related to Kwan, the main character in the story and marked their rubrics accordingly. On the other hand, cultural relevance scores for the story *The Wind and the Sun* showed that the readers did not find as many connections with the story. For this story, Adam stated, “No, the characters don’t talk like me. The wind blows and the sun just used its rays” as he circled a “1” to indicate no cultural relevance for that question.

### Reading Proficiency

Once the cultural relevance scores were analyzed, I turned to the reading assessment data. A look at the reading accuracy scores shown in Table 2 reveals that all readers made very few miscues during the reading of both stories. This indicates that the stories were within the participant’s independent (95%-100%) or instructional (90%- 94%) reading levels (Clay, 2002).

**Table 2.** *Reading Accuracy Scores*

Participants	<i>The Wind and the Sun</i>	<i>Kwan the Artist</i>
Ricardo	95	97
Christian	96	95
Lucas	98	99
Anna	95	96
Adam	93	98
Daniela	92	94
Zoraida	96	94
Sandra	99	99
Andres	96	98
<b>Mean Scores</b>	<b>96.7</b>	<b>95.6</b>

### Miscue Analysis Reader Profiles

These accuracy scores alone, however, do not provide a complete picture of the students' reading as the process of reading is much more than simply getting the words right. While accuracy scores give useful quantitative data, an examination of the qualitative information provided by miscue analysis shows valuable information about the participant's comprehension during reading. In the In-depth Miscue Analysis Procedure (Goodman et al., 2005), the miscues are coded and the retelling is scored. Next, a reader profile is created by adding the results from the coding of each miscue for Meaning Construction, Grammatical Relationships, Graphic Similarity, Sound Similarity, and determining reading percentages for each score for the entire passage. Retelling scores are also included on reader profiles. Tables 3a (*Kwan the Artist*) and 3b (*The Wind and the Sun*) summarize the data from the reading profiles for each of the nine participants' reading of the two stories.

The first section shown summarizes the data on Meaning Construction which are determined by combining information that deals with semantic acceptability of miscues, meaning change caused by miscues, and correction of miscues. These patterns indicate how closely the meaning the reader makes of the text matches the expected meaning. When analyzing Tables 3a and 3b, the score in this first column represents the percentage of miscues that made sense with little or no meaning change. The second columns show the data on the Grammatical Relationships of miscues which indicate the degree to which readers produce sentences that are syntactically acceptable and/or corrected. The third columns show the percentage of miscues that show *high* or *some* graphic similarity to the expected response. The fourth columns show the percentage of miscues that show *high* or *some* sound similarity to the expected response. The last columns show the holistic retelling scores. Again, while the miscues provide information about how the readers comprehend *during* the reading, the retelling provides information about what readers have comprehended at the *end* of each reading. Each retelling was scored holistically on a scale of 1 to 5.

**Table 3a.** *Miscue Analysis Reader Profile Summary for Kwan the Artist (Giles, 2007a).*

Participants	Meaning Construction Percentages	Grammatical Relationship Percentages	Graphic Similarity Percentages	Sound Similarity Percentages	Holistic Retelling Scores
Ricardo	100	100	75	100	4
Christian	84	74	50	25	4
Lucas	100	67	100	50	4
Anna	89	89	72	57	3.5
Adam	55	78	100	100	3
Daniela	74	87	100	100	3.5
Zoraida	91	91	88	88	3
Sandra	100	100	50	75	4
Andres	80	80	63	76	3
<b>Mean</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>3.6</b>

**Table 3b.** *Miscue Analysis Reader Profile Summary for The Wind and the Sun (Giles, 2007b).*

Participants	Meaning Construction Percentages	Grammatical Relationship	Graphic Similarity Percentages	Sound Similarity Percentages	Holistic Retelling Scores
Ricardo	92	59	84	100	3.5
Christian	80	60	88	88	3
Lucas	80	40	100	100	2.5
Anna	80	60	100	100	2.5
Adam	50	59	100	88	2.5
Daniela	43	57	100	100	2
Zoraida	84	83	100	100	3
Sandra	100	33	100	100	3.5
Andres	64	63	91	91	1
<b>Mean</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>2.6</b>

### Miscue Analysis: *Kwan the Artist*

The miscue analysis data show that all nine participants were more proficient in their comprehending during their reading of *Kwan the Artist*, the story they identified as being more culturally relevant. A higher percentage of the miscues

made as they read this story showed strength of meaning construction and grammatical relationship. Such miscues are considered *high quality* miscues but a simple count of accuracy does not show this difference. For example, four readers - Adam, Anna, Daniela, and Ricardo - all made the same miscue substituting *his* for *this* in the following sentence:

*his*

He wished that he could be good at something at this school.

The sentence that these readers created makes sense and is grammatically correct meaning that while they made this miscue, there was no loss of meaning. Two other participants, Sandra and Christian, made a similar high quality miscue, omitting the circled word, as they read the same sentence. They read:

He wished that he could be good at something at (this) school.

Both participants omitted the word *this* in their reading of the sentence. In coding miscues, circling a word indicates that it was omitted. A final example of this type of high quality miscue comes from Anna in her reading of *Kwan the Artist*. Anna inserted the word *all* in her reading of the following sentence:

But Kwan couldn't understand all the words that she was saying, and so he couldn't

*all*

do ^ his work very well.

Perhaps Anna inserted *all* to make the second clause parallel to the first clause. This extra stress makes sense and also works grammatically.

### **Miscue Analysis: *The Wind and the Sun***

The examples above show the types of high quality miscues that were produced during the reading of *Kwan the Artist*. When comparing the percentages of high quality miscues as indicated by strength of meaning construction and grammatical relationships between the two stories, the Reader Profiles show that for all nine participants, the reading of *The Wind and the Sun* was not as strong as the reading of the more culturally relevant story. Many of the miscues the participants made during the reading of *The Wind and the Sun* did not make sense. For example, Daniela substituted the word *sun* for *snow* in the following sentence:

*sun*

But I can melt the snow on the mountains and turn it into water.

While grammatically this miscue fit into the sentence (she substituted a noun for a noun), the idea of the sun melting and turning into water does not make sense. In the analysis of all of the miscues for all of the readers, the meaning construction scores were higher in *Kwan the Artist*, the story that the readers identified as being more culturally relevant.

An analysis of the participants' use of graphic and sound information as they read (see Tables 3a and 3b), reveals that the mean use of graphophonic cues was higher for the readings of *The Wind and the Sun* than the readings of *Kwan the Artist*. The readers' over-reliance on the graphophonic system during their reading of the story that was not as culturally relevant is revealed in part through their production of more non-word miscues. These are miscues produced when readers attempt to "sound out" words which can result in a loss of meaning. In miscue coding, non-words are indicated with a \$ at the beginning of the word. Zoraida, for example, made the following two non-word miscues in her reading of *The Wind and the Sun*:

*\$indead*

After a while, the man became very hot indeed.

*\$clouk*

He stopped walking and took off his cloak.

Overall, the nine readers produced 13 non-word miscues during their reading of *The Wind and the Sun* but only 3 non-word miscues during the reading of *Kwan the Artist*.

The analysis of the Grammatical Relationships shown in Tables 3a and 3b reveals that a higher percentage of the miscues made during the reading of *The Wind and the Sun* showed weakness in grammar than miscues produced while reading *Kwan the Artist*. During his reading of *The Wind and the Sun*, Christian made the following miscue:

*tighter*

But the man only pulled his cloak more tighter around him.

Christian substituted the word *tighter* for *tightly* which does not work grammatically in the sentence. Anna made two similar miscues in her reading of the same story when, in the first sentence she substituted *turned* for *turn* and in the second sentence substituted *warm* for *warmer*.

*turned*

"But I can melt the snow on the mountains and turn it into water."

warm

As he walked along, the man became warmer and warmer.

In the analysis of all of the miscues for all of the readers, the grammatical relationships scores were higher with the story that the readers identified as being more culturally relevant. ELLs often make miscues involving word endings, such as those discussed above. However, the participants made more of these types of miscues when they were reading *The Wind and the Sun*.

### Retelling Analysis

While the miscue analysis data provides details about the process of comprehending during reading, the retelling data provides information about overall comprehension after reading. The analysis of the retelling scores reveals that all but one of the participants had higher levels of overall comprehension for *Kwan the Artist*, the story the participants identified as being more culturally relevant. One student, Zoraida, scored a three for both retellings. The mean retelling score for *Kwan the Artist* was 3.6 while the mean for *The Wind and the Sun* was 2.6. Overall, unaided retellings produced by the readers were more complete for *Kwan the Artist*. For example, during his unaided retelling of this story, Lucas provided a rather lengthy, detailed summary. Below are excerpts from his unaided retelling:

That one was about a boy named Kwan that came from another country to this country, and he was in a new school, and in his other country, he might have talked another language; so he didn't know this language very good...But when the teacher told the children to take out the brushes and the paint, he knew that he loved painting...and he remembered about the plane that took him from his country to this country...so he wanted to draw it, and everybody in the class thought he was the best artist there and liked his drawing, and so they went and crowded him and liked his drawing.

In contrast, the participants tended to remember less or were not as accurate when retelling the story of *The Wind and the Sun*. They also provided fewer details and paused more often and for longer periods of time. Because of this, I asked more questions in order to prompt the participants to elaborate. Lucas, for example, provided far fewer details when retelling *The Wind and the Sun*.

A: Ok. Please retell that story for me. What do you remember?

Lucas: The wind and the sun were arguing about who's stronger. They saw a man and they tried to compete with each other. (6 second pause)



A: And?

Lucas: The sun won.

A: How did he win?

Lucas: Because he warmed the man up.

A: And what about the wind? What did he try to do?

Lucas: He tried to blew, blow the man's cloak. He said he could beat the man.

A: Tell me more.

Lucas: The sun beat the man in the competition.

Unlike his retelling of *Kwan the Artist*, Lucas required more prompting to retell the main ideas in the story. During the beginning of his retelling, it appeared that he understood that the story was about a competition between the wind and the sun. Later, however, he mistakenly thought the man was also competing. Lucas, like many of the participants, was not as proficient in his retelling of *The Wind and the Sun*.

### Supporting Reading with Culturally Relevant Texts

While the reading accuracy scores for these nine readers suggested that both stories were within either their instructional or independent reading levels, the miscue analysis data provided further insights into the participant's comprehension of each story. When analyzing the retellings and the types of miscues participants made during the reading of the two stories, they were more proficient in their reading of the story they identified as being more culturally relevant. For example, the readers made more high quality miscues that made sense and were grammatically correct when reading the story to which they related. The retellings also revealed a better understanding of *Kwan the Artist* as the participants remembered more and were more accurate and needed less prompting when retelling this story, which they found to be more culturally relevant. In contrast, the readers were less proficient when reading *The Wind and the Sun* where the miscue analysis revealed that students spent more time attempting to sound out unknown words as they read. In doing so, they produced more non-word miscues that did not make sense.

The connections seen in this study between cultural relevance of text and reading proficiency indicate that teachers can help support the reading development of their ELLs by considering cultural relevance when selecting texts. This is especially important when selecting texts used for assessment purposes. The Cultural

Relevance Rubric provides teachers and students with a practical tool that can be used in the text selection process. As described, it is helpful to talk through the rubric items with students as they fill it out. In cases where commercial assessment kits are used with pre-selected texts, teachers might consider having students complete a Cultural Relevance Rubric as part of their assessment. Adding a cultural relevance score to the reading assessment data would provide a more complete picture of their students' reading.

## Conclusion

It is important to note that different books are culturally relevant for different readers. While it may be difficult to identify books that are relevant for a reader for all eight areas on the rubric, finding books with some cultural relevance for the reader is helpful, especially for ELLs who are not only learning to read but are also learning English. In order to support their reading development, at least some of the texts ELLs are provided should be culturally relevant. The more engaged students are with culturally relevant texts, the more developed their reading skills may become. Building reading proficiency is essential because ELL students will need to be able to read all types of texts, including those that may not be culturally relevant. Using the Cultural Relevance Rubric as a tool for text selection helps match students with engaging texts that can build reading proficiency.



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## About the Author

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